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ABSTRACT

Modern Hebrew is an excellent example of a national language, an indigenous language that its speakers view as uniquely related to their common history, values, and identity. Hebrew was a unifying factor for millenia before the rise of modern national movements. When the movement for the restoration of Jewish political self-determination arose, Hebrew served as a symbol around which national sentiment could be mobilized. After self-determination was realized, it became a medium for the integration and control of a diverse population, continuing as a symbol of national identity among the Jews living in their ancestral land and becoming a symbol of Jewish national identity for many Jews in other lands. Its use as an everyday language in the land of its birth has helped Israeli Jews to justify and legitimize their sovereignty over a land where two national movements compete. (MSE)

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Modern Hebrew as a National Language

Robert L. Cooper

Modern Hebrew is an example par excellence of a national language: an indigenous language which its speakers view as uniquely related to their common history, values, and destiny. The use of Hebrew as an everyday language in the land of its birth has helped Israeli Jews to justify and legitimize their sovereignty over a land in which two national movements compete. This paper briefly describes the process whereby modern Hebrew emerged as a symbol of national identity.[1]

Although the ravages of the Roman-Judean wars in the first and second centuries of the present era substantially depleted the Jewish population of Palestine, and although there was a large-scale conversion to Christianity by the remaining Jews during the Byzantine period, a remnant of Jewry survived and lived continuously in Palestine until modern times. Their number was augmented by Jews from other communities who returned to Palestine either because they sought asylum from wars or from persecution or because they wanted to study, pray, or be buried in their ancestral land, to which the thrice-daily prayers of their religion refer. Until the nineteenth century, however, immigration was small and sporadic, and reemigration, due to poor economic conditions and to poor conditions of health and personal security, was probably substantial (Bachi, 1977:77).

When local conditions improved somewhat in the mid-nineteenth

century, Jewish immigration became continuous, with perhaps 25,000 Jews immigrating between 1850 and 1880. This was a substantial number in comparison with the small size of the total population which around 1890 is thought to have been around 532,000, of whom about 43,000 are estimated to have been Jews (Bachi 1977:32,77).

The developing Jewish population of mid-nineteenth century Palestine was divided into several communities, each speaking its own language. Jews from Eastern Europe spoke Yiddish, Jews from Balkan countries and the Ottoman empire spoke Ladino (Judeo Spanish) and Arabic, and Jews from Africa and Asia spoke Arabic, which was often a Jewish communal variety (Bachi 1977:286). The only language that united them all was Hebrew.

Although Hebrew had been abandoned as a language of everyday communication about 200 C. E., it continued to be used as a written language, not only in prayer and in the study of sacred texts, but also in the composition of legal, scientific, and philosophical texts and secular belles lettres. The number of Hebrew books written between the abandonment of Hebrew as a vernacular and the founding of the state of Israel (1948) is immense, reaching the tens of thousands (Rabin, 1973:9). Until the nineteenth century, a large proportion of the Jewish male population in most countries of the diaspora could read and understand Hebrew, and many could express themselves in writing as well (Rabin 1983:42).

While it is true that between its abandonment and its revival as a vernacular it was used principally as a liturgical

and literary language, it was occasionally spoken as a lingua franca by Jews who shared no other language. It appears to have been used by Jews in mid-nineteenth century Palestine as a lingua franca, although in limited contexts such as the market. It is possible, moreover, that in the Ladino- and Arabic-speaking Jewish communities a gradual transition to Hebrew as an all-purpose lingua franca was taking place (Rabin 1973:70). Thus, as Blanc (1968), Fellman (1973, 1974), Rabin (1973) and others have pointed out, the term revival is a misnomer. Hebrew is no exception to the rule that once a language has passed out of all use whatsoever, it remains dead. The "revival" of Hebrew refers to its resuscitation as a vernacular, a language of everyday life.

The movement for the revival of Hebrew began in Palestine and in Eastern Europe in the 1880's, under the influence of European national movements, which viewed the language of a people as inseparable from its nationhood. As Rabin (1973:69) has pointed out, however, the Hebrew revival movement differed from many of the language movements associated with European nationalism. Whereas many of the latter attempted to extend the range of a vernacular's functions to include those of literacy, the task of the Hebrew revival movement was to extend the range of a written language to include spoken functions. Whereas the peoples mobilized by European national movements could often be united by a common vernacular, the Jews were divided by their vernaculars. But they could be unified through Hebrew.

A series of pogroms and repressive measures in Russia

following the assassination of Czar Alexander II (1881) started a wave of mass emigration of Jews, a small number of whom came to Palestine, then part of the Ottoman empire. Many of those who came to Palestine in those years were young intellectuals, influenced by European ideas of nationalism and embued with the desire for a life better and different from the one they had known in Russia.

The young idealists who started coming to Palestine in the 1880's welcomed the idea of using Hebrew as an all-purpose vernacular, an idea first promoted by Eliezer Ben Yehuda. He was a young Russian Jew who arrived in Palestine in 1881. An indefatigible promoter of the Hebrew revival, he was the first to speak Hebrew at home and to raise his children in Hebrew.

Between 1881 and 1903, from twenty to thirty thousand Jews arrived (Bachi, 1977:79). They adopted Ben Yehuda's idea of introducing Hebrew as the language of instruction in the schools of the settlements they founded. A system of Hebrew schools was established, including kindergartens (from 1898) and high schools (from 1906). "Between 1900 and 1910 young couples began to enter into matrimony who had gone through the Hebrew school and whose Hebrew speech was fluent and natural. At that time were born the first children in families who spoke nothing but Hebrew in the home, and those babies grew up in Hebrew without anyone making a special effort to assure this. They were the first people, after a lapse of 1,700 years, who knew no language but Hebrew" (Rabin, 1973:73).

Due to conditions caused by the First World War, immigration

came virtually to a halt, but it began again under the British, who had captured Palestine from the Ottoman empire in 1918. The British accepted a mandate from the League of Nations in 1922 to administer Palestine and Transjordan, with Palestine defined as the territory west of the Jordan River in the former Turkish districts of Acre, Nablus, and Jerusalem. The Mandatory government declared Hebrew, along with Arabic and English, an official language.

During the period of British rule, the population of Palestine almost tripled, from about 676,000 in 1919 to 1,970,000 in 1947 (Bachi, 1977:40). Both Jews and Muslims, the two major groups, showed the same absolute increase in population, 600,000 each, but in relative terms the increase was much greater for the Jews, who grew eleven times in size, from about 56,000 in 1919 to about 650,000 in 1948 (Bachi, 1977:40). This high rate of increase among the Jews was due mainly to immigration. During this period, most of the immigrants came from Eastern Europe and from Central Europe, initially for political and economic reasons and later due to Nazi persecution. There was also, however, a substantial immigration from the Yemen and other Asian countries during this period.

The establishment of the state of Israel in May 1948 resulted in an enormous wave of immigration, as restrictions on immigration, imposed in 1939, were abolished. Survivors of the Holocaust, unwilling or unable to remain in Europe, were now able to enter Israel. At the same time, a growing sense of insecurity among the Jews of Asia and Africa, combined in some cases with

messianic expectations, led to a mass exodus from those continents. During the three and one-half years after the establishment of the state of Israel, close to 700,000 Jews immigrated, more than doubling the Jewish population (Bachi, 1977:79). During the remainder of the 1950's through the end of 1960, almost 300,000 more Jews arrived (Bachi, 1977:79). Altogether, between 1948 through the end of 1978, more than 1,600,000 Jews came to Israel (Goldman, 1980:47), about two and one-half times the number of Jewish inhabitants at the time of independence. In 1950, the proportion of the Jewish population in Israel who had been born abroad was close to 75%. Since then it has been declining. By 1978 it was about 45% (Goldman, 1980:13).

The great waves of immigration which followed the creation of the state swamped the Hebrew speakers in a sea of non-Hebrew languages. But linguistic diversity had long been a feature of the Jewish community in Palestine. Based on data collected during the censuses of 1916-1918, Bachi (1956:197) estimates that if any two Jews met at random during that period the chance that they would share the same principal language was only about one in three.

Even then (Bachi, 1956:194), the most common principal language was Hebrew (40%), followed by Yiddish (36%), Arabic (18%), and Ladino (4%). It is likely that Hebrew was also the chief lingua franca among the Jews of Palestine. This hypothesis is based on the assumption that the language most likely to be shared by interlocutors who did not speak the same mother tongue

was Hebrew, if only in its literary form. While the hypothesis is reasonable that Hebrew was the language most likely to be chosen as a lingua franca, it remains a hypothesis which must be checked by the analysis of archival material and by interviews with octogenarians and nonogenarians who can tell us what they remember of those days. This is a task which Ezri Uval, of the Hebrew University, has undertaken.

When the state of Israel was established in 1948, the probability that two speakers drawn at random from the Jewish population would share the same principal language had increased from 32%, at the close of the Ottoman period, to 58% (Bachi, 1956:197). Hebrew was by then the principal language of the bulk of the Jewish population. While the linguistic homogeneity of the Jewish population increased, the linguistic homogeneity of those not using Hebrew decreased (Schmelz and Bachi, 1974:762). That is, the population claiming languages other than Hebrew as principal language became ever more heterogeneous linguistically. The increasing heterogeneity of those not using Hebrew as principal language was due, on the one hand, to the increased variety of languages spoken by immigrants who arrived during the British Mandate and particularly during the period of mass immigration after the establishment of the state and, on the other, to the marked erosion of Yiddish. Whereas in the censuses of 1916-1918 close to 60% of all Jews who did not speak Hebrew as principal language spoke Yiddish, by 1972 that figure had dropped to 19% for those aged 14 or older (Bachi, 1977:290). Of the eight languages listed by Bachi (1977:290), Yiddish is the only

language whose percentage among non-Hebrew speakers has declined in each of the five periods reported from 1916 to 1972, even between 1948 and 1954 when large numbers of Yiddish-speaking immigrants arrived.

Perhaps the precipitous decline of Yiddish has stemmed in part from its decreasing usefulness as a lingua franca. As Greenberg (1965) points out, the more persons who use a lingua franca, the more useful it becomes and the more it exerts pressure on others to learn it too. He also points out that nothing stops the spread of a lingua franca more surely than the existence of a rival lingua franca. If our hypothesis is correct that Hebrew was the chief lingua franca between Jews by the end of the Ottoman period, then its spread created pressure on others to learn it and prevented the spread of its chief rival Yiddish. The potential of Yiddish as lingua franca was probably undermined, in addition, by the fact that where opposition existed to the use of Hebrew for secular purposes, it was found among "old-fashioned" ultra-orthodox persons of Eastern European background. Almost all of these spoke Yiddish and thus had no need of a lingua franca with one another. If the opponents to Hebrew for secular purposes had been linguistically heterogeneous, Yiddish would have been their probable choice of lingua franca because Yiddish was spoken by the greatest number of persons who did not claim Hebrew as principal language. As it was, the opponents to Hebrew were linguistically homogeneous whereas those not opposed to Hebrew were linguistically heterogeneous. So the field was left clear for Hebrew.

The linguistic diversity created by immigration has promoted organized efforts to help newcomers learn Hebrew. These efforts are considerable. The state subsidizes Hebrew courses for new immigrants and a substantial proportion of new immigrants enroll. Among the Rumanian immigrants studied by Hofman and Fisherman (1971), for example, as well as among the immigrants in Rosenbaum's (1983) sample, about 40% had studied Hebrew formally in Israel. In addition, news is broadcast several times a day in simplified Hebrew spoken at a slower rate, and a weekly newspaper is produced in simplified Hebrew.

Whereas organized efforts to promote the status of Hebrew are now confined chiefly to helping immigrants learn the language, organized efforts in the early part of the century were of a different character. There were at least three types of activity. First, there was an effort to modernize the language and to standardize new terms. This is an effort which continues today but which was especially important when the lack of vocabulary for everday items and activities was keenly felt. While we can not be sure, it is reasonable that equipping Hebrew to serve as an all-purpose medium encouraged people to use it. Wherever possible, new terms were derived from existing Hebrew words or roots. Modernization was not purchased at the cost of authenticity.

Second, there were the efforts of teachers to promote Hebrew as a language of instruction, which culminated in the "Language War", which Rabin (1973:75) has called the "first national struggle" of modern Jewish Palestine. A German-Jewish foundation

for the advancement of Jews in technologically underdeveloped countries, the Hilfsverein der Deutschen Juden, planned to set up a technical high school in Haifa. The foundation operated a number of schools in Palestine, all of which used Hebrew as the medium of instruction. Nonetheless, the Hilfsverein felt obliged to promote German as a language of culture and its promotion of German in the curriculum of its schools aroused resentment. When the Hilfsverein announced in 1913 that its new "Technikum" was to use not Hebrew but German as the language of instruction, on the grounds that Hebrew was not sufficiently developed for work in the sciences, the resentment exploded. The teachers left the organization's schools and took their pupils with them. The boycott prevented the implementation of the Hilfsverein's decision. In Rabin's words (1973:75): "The Jewish population of Palestine acted on this occasion according to the patterns of national struggle, and we shall hardly go wrong if we consider the Language War episode as the first proof that indeed there had come into being in Palestine a modern Jewish nation, on a predominantly linguistic basis".

The third type of organized effort involved encouraging people to use Hebrew. For example, a youth organization, the Gedud Meginnei Hasafah ("Language Protection Legion"), was founded in 1923 to combat the use of languages other than Hebrew and remained in existence until the late 1930's (Wigoder, 1972:1000). Among its activities was the distribution of posters bearing the legend, Ivri, daber Ivrit! ("Hebrew [person], speak Hebrew!").

At least until the victory of Hebrew in the Language War and probably continuing through much of the Mandate period as well, the goals of Hebrew promoters were the goals of the Jewish national movement - the return of the Jewish people to the land of its yearning. Hebrew was a central symbol for the awakening and maintenance of nationalist sentiment. To promote Hebrew was to remind its users of the glorious tradition of which they were the heirs and of the political self-determination which they might win for the Jewish people. Hebrew was not only the vehicle of a classical literary and religious culture but it had also been the medium of the Jews' former political sovereignty. In principal, any common language can serve to mobilize the masses, but an indigenous language, carrier of a great classical, religious, and political tradition, which can be claimed as the heritage of the entire group, is a particularly powerful symbol around which to rally.

Once the ascendancy of Hebrew as the chief Jewish lingua franca in Palestine was assured, there was a change in emphasis in the national goals served by the promotion of Hebrew. A vehicle of mass communication was needed to integrate the diverse ethnic groups which were drawn together, particularly after the mass immigration following the establishment of the state, and to facilitate the administration of national institutions. This is not to say that Hebrew lost its role as a symbol of national identity. Indeed, one could argue that it grew more important as a national symbol the more ethnolinguistically diverse the population became. What is suggested here is that efforts which

were at first directed towards exploiting the symbolic value of Hebrew, in order to mobilize the Jews in their struggle for self-determination, were redirected, once the struggle was won, towards strengthening Hebrew's position as a vehicle of mass communication, in order to integrate and control a diverse population. Initial efforts at language planning were directed chiefly towards modernizing Hebrew and encouraging people to use it. Subsequent efforts were directed chiefly towards encouraging people to learn it.

That Hebrew is a symbol of national identity for Israeli Jews is clear. Does Hebrew serve a similar symbolic function in the diaspora? Many diaspora Jews do study Hebrew, mostly within the framework of Jewish schools. Before the establishment of the state of Israel, these schools attempted to teach their pupils those Hebrew-language skills which would equip them to carry out their religious obligations, including the study of sacred texts. After 1948, there has been a growing tendency for the goals of instruction to include fluency in modern spoken Hebrew as well.

What purposes are likely to be served by learning modern Israeli Hebrew in the diaspora? Practical secular purposes are likely to be minimal. Most diaspora Jews have little interest in moving to Israel. Learning modern Israeli Hebrew is not likely to serve as a marker of religious identification either. One can practice orthodox Judaism without knowledge of the Hebrew vernacular. A minority among the most religiously observant, in fact, still believe that the use of Hebrew for secular purposes is a sacrilege. But because modern Hebrew is a preeminent symbol of

the Jewish state, knowledge of modern Hebrew can serve as an assertion of identification with Israel, which is viewed positively by most diaspora Jews, religiously observant or not. To the extent that diaspora Jews identify with Israel (and one can identify with Israel without any intention of living there), it is likely that modern Hebrew serves as a symbol of Jewish national identity, not only in Israel but in the diaspora as well.

The foregoing account can be summarized as follows. Hebrew was a unifying factor for millennia before the rise of modern national movements. When the movement for the restoration of Jewish political self-determination arose, Hebrew served as a symbol around which national sentiment could be mobilized. After self-determination was realized, Hebrew became a medium for the integration and control of a diverse population, continuing as a symbol of national identity among the Jews living in their ancestral land and becoming a symbol of Jewish national identity for many Jews in the lands beyond.

Notes

[1]Much of the material in this article appears in Cooper (1984).

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